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January 17, 2009: The Tony Blair Faith Foundation

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Title: The Tony Blair Faith Foundation

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1/17/2009--This month's Yale Alumni Magazine features Tony Blair and his new faith foundation. Blair is teaching at Yale and that is also where the US operations of the foundation will be headquartered. The story states that the main project of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation will be "to foster greater understanding among people of various religions" and "to make religion a force for good as globalization mixes together people of different cultures and faiths". Blair also states that faith should have a role in public policy. Undoubtedly the Foundation will foster good work, like raising funds for mosquito netting in the developing world. And, undoubtedly as well, it would be best if the forces of globalization were restrained by normative principles and not just by power. As Blair says in the article, religion can be a force for such normative counter force. The basic problem is that you cannot do work of this kind without clear theological thinking. Otherwise, you are saying that all religion is the same and that therefore people should be able to get along. Pope Benedict has shown both the promise and the limits of genuine ecumenicism. Believers do believe certain things are necessary for salvation. Non-believers are not saved, or the equivalent, not out of ill-will, but because of the necessity of religious belief. Tolerance and salvation are not the same thing, however. Pope Benedict does not say that non-Christians are saved anyway (actually he says no human being knows who is saved) but he does affirm that God's children should not kill each other over religious differences. Benedict's limited approach is probably more promising than Blair's idea that God would not exclude anybody. Nor is it clear what Blair means by religion. Here is how the article ends: "I have a complete belief that what most people want is a sense of spirituality and a sense of purpose derived from spirituality in their lives, and they don't want to exclude other people." This sounds more like Hallowed Secularism than like any religion I know. It lacks any sense of doctrine or even organization. Where this kind of formulation differs from Hallowed Secularism, however, is its lack of recognition of the power of justice in history. A feeling of spirituality is no doubt a nice thing, but as the saying goes, if you want peace, do justice. Jews and Muslims are fighting today in Gaza not because one or the other lacks spiritual feelings but because they do not agree on what is just.